

Joshua's Pawn Shop
Fun and Games
by Frank B. Luke

Harold Matthers hung his head in front of his work computer. These days the bug fixes just kept coming. He hadn't had a chance to write a new program from scratch in over six months. He rolled back in his chair and looked at his desk. With its two monitors and a phone, it looked like every other programmer's desk in the department. His computer was under the desk and a certificate recognizing five years of service to Intertech in Cambridge, Massachusetts, hung on the wall. It was two years old.

Hanging next to the certificate was his only personal effect in the cubicle—a photo from college. It showed him at a table with six others. They had pencils, papers, and books spread in front of them, but they weren't studying. The picture was taken the night they completed a long-running campaign for the game *Mythos & Madness*. He smiled. The campaign to find out what happened to the Carlyle expedition had been especially deadly. Everyone in the group had made new characters at least once before completing the mission and breaking up the cult.

Life, even programming, had been enjoyable then. Now he wanted to scream at his computer most days. Of course, if he did that, Intertech would not be pleased. He needed something to take his mind off work when he wasn't here. He'd have to pull out his notes from that campaign tonight. Pleasant memories would ease his mind.

Harold whistled as he went to the vending machine in the break room. Every afternoon he had a Code Red. At the table in the break room were two women from his department. Paula, a tall, curvy blonde whom Harold had his eye on, was talking with Jeana, a thin brunette of average height with glasses. They were both dressed nicely, with blouse and skirt. As Harold put the money in the machine, he heard Jeana asked Paula, "I didn't get to ask yesterday how your trip was. Was it a good one?"

Harold opened the bottle with a whoosh and started to take a drink.

"Oh, yeah. It was a great weekend. I got to see the folks and some friends from high school. I love

Dunwich this time of year.”

Harold choked and worked very hard to keep the soda in his mouth. “Where did you go?”

Paula looked at him like he was crazy. “Ipswich,” she said very slowly. “You know, it’s up in the northeast part of the state. I grew up there.”

Harold shook his head. “Sorry. My ears were playing tricks on me.” He chuckled.

Paula chuckled with him. “What did you think I said?”

Harold waved the question off with his free hand. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not important. I was thinking about something else a few minutes ago, and must have had a random neuron firing.” He winced when he heard such a geeky statement come from his mouth in front of Paula.

Jeana laughed. “Oh, I have those all the time. My sister calls them ‘brain farts,’ but that’s just gross.”

Paula laughed, too. “You’re Harold. You work in the cubicle next to Robert, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” He was surprised she knew his name. “We worked on several projects together, but he’s focusing more on the database admin side now.”

“That’s what I heard. Think he’ll get the promotion?”

“No question. He’s very good at it.” If Robert got that promotion, Harold would be the first choice to fill Robert’s current role. He just wasn’t sure he wanted it. The pay increase would be nice, but his heart just wasn’t in technology anymore.

Paula looked at her watch. “Oh, I have a meeting in five minutes. Gotta run, Jeana. Nice talking to you, Harold.” She rushed out the door. He felt a small breeze after she passed. Her perfume was very nice. It was a floral scent, lilies, he thought.

He put the cap back on the bottle and walked back to his cubicle. He supposed it could have gone worse with Paula.

* * *

That night Harold went into the spare bedroom of his apartment. The rest of the apartment was orderly and had functional furniture, but he always put off organizing this plain room which he simply used as storage. He moved cardboard boxes around the carpeted floor until he found the one he was looking for way in the back. Labeled "college years" and underneath that "TMUI," it held the books he was looking for. His gaming group had called itself "The Miskatonic University Irregulars."

Inside, he found the old books he was looking for. Smiling at the memories, he thumbed through the player's guide. The game was full of monsters, cults, and uncaring aliens who looked on humanity as their playthings. Most of the ancient aliens were amoral--they simply didn't care about humanity any more than humans cared about ants. Others wanted to either destroy or enslave all of humanity. That long campaign from the picture had been against Nyarlathotep, one of the truly evil and manipulative aliens.

One photocopied sheet stuck out from the pages, and Harold looked it over. At the top, he had written, "Harold Matthers" next to "Name." Underneath that it said, "Occupation: Engineering Student." He smiled broadly to see it. He had almost forgotten how he had written statistics for himself those years ago. Everyone in the group had done that and then played themselves in a set of connected adventures. With a pen, he copied the information onto a clean character sheet, updating his age from 21 to 28.

He looked over the rest of the skills and stats. *M&M* was the only game he ever played that tracked sanity. As you played, the things like ghosts and aliens you encountered made you a little crazy, and you were expected to act like that in your subsequent turns. You could get your sanity back if you worked hard at it. The game was dark and scary (especially when played by candle light and with mood music), but he had never had more fun going insane than those nights around the table with the rest of the Irregulars. His sanity score was sitting pretty at 65. Alone of the gaming group, Harold had ended that play-yourself campaign with more sanity than he started. The game's referee (called the Lorekeeper) had been very surprised. Harold left the score alone.

The rest of the statistics looked good with minor updates. Since he had finished college, he increased his education stat and just wrote "Engineer" in the occupation area. Most of the adventures and campaigns were set in the 1920s, so he couldn't list "computer programmer." He turned the sheet over and, with a chuckle, listed some of his more technical, dull, and obscure programming books under "Arcane Tomes, Spells, and Artifacts."

When he was done, he put the sheet with his coffee mug to take to work the next day.

Harold looked in the box one last time and pulled out his bag of dice. As situations in the game arose, you would roll the dice. If the total of the dice was less than the named statistic on your sheet (with any necessary modifications), you won and had a good result. If higher, the results would range from minor inconvenience to outright disaster.

He owned several sets, but he dug through them looking for two special ones. There were Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, two six siders that failed him more often than not. Ace, the four sider that liked to turn up a one. All his others were there, but not two very special dice. *Oh, no!* he thought. *The Colonel and Sarge are gone!* The Colonel and Sarge were his lucky dice, the two that he used when the chips were down. To his horror, he saw a hole in the bottom of the dice bag. They must have fallen out. Frantic, he dug through the rest of the box and found a small hole in the bottom corner, just big enough for a ten-sider to fall through.

They could have fallen out anywhere when I was moving, he thought. *Well, no use crying over spilt milk or lost dice. I'll just take Laurel and Hardy instead.* They were still were in the bag.

Grinning, he put the blue Laurel and red Hardy next to the sheet. Like the Colonel and Sarge, they were ten siders of a type called percentile dice. One die was labeled by tens and the other by ones. He planned to take the sheet to work the next day and hang it on the wall of his cube as a joke. The dice would simply sit on his desk. Several of his fellow geeks should recognize what the dice were from.

Looking at the clock, he saw it was closing on 10:00. He wondered where the time had gone. Well, no video games tonight. He needed to be rested for work the next day. Gone were the days when he could play till midnight and still feel refreshed at six the next morning.

* * *

Harold sighed at the calculation error on the screen. This bug had been plaguing him all morning. The routine should have a positive number in the end, but somehow a negative was resulting. At least the bug's existence was obvious, but where was it coming from?

He rolled his chair back for a moment, hoping that a little distance would open his eyes to something

obvious. His eyes fell on the character sheet now hanging on his cubicle wall. “Why not?” he said out loud and picked up the two, ten-sided dice. Whenever you got really stumped in the game, the Lorekeeper could offer a hint *if* you rolled the dice and the total was less than your intelligence score. His score was 60. “Give me an idea check,” he muttered, using the term from the game. “Under 60, baby, under 60.”

He rolled the dice. “23! Good job!” Rolling less than half of his intelligence would result in a really good hint. He set the dice to the side. “If only it could be that easy.” He looked back at the screen. “Wait a second! There it is!” A complex formula had a left parentheses in the wrong place. He changed a line of code and recompiled. He watched with satisfaction as the single failing test changed from a red icon to green. Now they all passed.

Harold ticked that item off the bug tracker and went to the next issue in the list.

* * *

Harold smiled at the noticeably-smaller list on his screen. He had fixed several bugs since the morning. It was turning out to be a good day. He needed one every now and then.

“Hey, guy, hope I’m not interrupting.”

Harold looked up to see his supervisor, Charles Carpenter, standing outside the cubicle.

“Nah. Come on in. I’ve just finished up another set of bug fixes. Got something big for me?” Harold had asked several times for a major project to work on.

“Well, yeah.” The supervisor pulled up a chair and set a folder on the desk. “You know those old Passport programs that we’re trying to phase out?”

Harold sighed. He was one of the few in the department who had any experience with the language. His days programming Passport were not happy memories, but he had needed the job badly during college. “Let me guess. Jillian wants a new feature and she absolutely cannot wait until the replacement program is ready.” The replacement was written in a different programming language. Almost by definition, that meant it would be better.

Charles laughed. “You know her well. I’ll leave the request here and you just tell me how long it will take to make the change.”

Harold opened the manila folder and winced again. Jillian wanted screen layouts changed and a new report. “Passport makes me a little crazy, Charles.”

Charles shrugged. “Someone has to do it, and nobody else here has the Passport experience you do.”

Lucky me. “How much padding am I allowed?”

Charles winked. “Make her think you’re a miracle worker.”

“Getting this to work *will* be a miracle,” Harold muttered looking at the request after Charles left. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the pair of dice. With a chuckle, he picked them up. “Crazy, huh. I think I need a sanity check. This shouldn’t be but a 1-point loss for a failure. Under 65, baby!”

The two dice clattered to the desk. Hardy showed 70, and Laurel showed 8. According to the rules of the game, Harold had just lost one point of sanity because he rolled over his score. “Nuts.” Harold laughed. “Well, if I’m going to play, I should play right.” He picked up a pencil to change his sheet and reached for it on the cube wall. He stopped with his hand outstretched.

He felt his heart thud and his breath quicken as the sheet already had the 65 marked out and replaced with 64. “What?” He blinked and rubbed his eyes, but the writing was still there. *I must be seeing things! I really am losing my mind.* As he stared at the paper, another black mark appeared and struck through the 64. Then a 63 appeared beneath the 64.

He stood up and took a step away from the hanging sheet. Mouth agape, he stared at the sheet hanging on the wall until Paula walked by. “Harold, are you okay?” She stood outside his cubicle, her brow wrinkled with worry.

“Yes. No. Maybe.” He moved to put himself between her and the sheet. If he was going crazy, it would ruin his chances with Paula. Then again, it would ruin everything else, too.

“Tell me what’s wrong.” She entered his cubicle and stood on the other side of his desk, pulling her long bangs back from her eyes.

Harold shook his head. “I’m sorry. I can’t explain it.” She had never been inside his cubicle before, and it

made him more nervous.

Paula's eyes widened slightly. "Oh." She tried to smile. "What are you hiding from me?" She moved around the desk, getting closer to him.

"Oh, nothing important. Just a little gag I wrote up." Harold backed up against the cubicle wall. Some part of his brain noticed her perfume smelled like the same lilies as yesterday.

"Then you won't mind me looking at it." She gently pushed him aside. Paula looked at the sheet and then at Harold before looking back to the sheet. She bent slightly to lean in close. "Whoa! *M&M!* 'Harold Matthers.' You wrote yourself up! Good PC there. Nice move rate to run away from the beasties. Good intelligence. High sanity is a must. Low on strength, but that's not as important in this game."

"You played?"

"Still do!" She looked away, blushing slightly, "Actually, they call me Lorekeeper Barbie at the Game Pit."

He blinked. This was more than he had bargained for. The beauty in front of him was a gamer.

"Have you ever run a game?" She played with her hair.

He shook his head. "I prefer to be surprised in the games. I can't if I know how everything is supposed to go."

She laughed. "The players will surprise you no matter how much you know about the scenarios. Did you have a favorite character in your campaigns?"

He grinned. "I took one character all the way through *Shadows of Yog-Sothoth* and *Tatters of the King*. He was a chemical engineering professor at Miskatonic University named Richard Armitage."

"Any relation to Henry?" Henry Armitage was a literature professor at the same university in the mythos behind the game.

"Cousin, actually. Richard was killed in the second session of *Masks of Nyarlathotep*." He chuckled. "We made the lorekeeper mad by joking how easy *Tatters* had been, so he busted Nyarlathotep out on us just to show us who's boss."

"That's not right." She frowned. "I would never do something like that to my players."

"I appreciate that," Harold said. "What was your favorite to run?"

Her eyes lit up. "*Horror on the Orient Express!*"

"You have that rare gem?"

She nodded. "I found it at an estate sale for five bucks."

"An estate sale?" That was certainly an odd place to find a *Mythos & Madness* campaign.

She shrugged. "Some guy in his forties died from a sudden heart attack."

He refused to look at the sheet, afraid it would show his score dropping again. Instead, he said, "I think I'm developing paranoia."

Paula shook her head and joked, "You haven't lost enough sanity." Losing sanity brought on different kinds of mental issues. Paranoia was one of them.

"Give me time."

The intercom squeaked as the music stopped and the boss' voice came on. "Please remember that the quarterly meeting is this Friday. We have good news to share from marketing and sales." The machine squeaked again and the music came back.

Harold shivered. It wasn't the piped seventies and eighties music playing before the announcement. It sounded like mostly brass and woodwinds. A drum and bass in the background kept rhythm.

"What kind of music is that?" he asked, feeling weird.

She paused to listen. "Van Halen's Runnin' with the Devil, muzak style." She spoke the next softly, "That's a sanity buster right there."

"No. That's not Van Halen. It isn't even Van Halen in a warm up when David Lee Roth has the flu." He tried to laugh it off. "I seriously need to see someone about my ears. I'm hearing things." He sat back down, hoping she would leave.

She stepped closer to his desk. "You really do hear something else, don't you?" Her fingers stopped just shy of his shoulder.

He nodded. "Swing music from the Big Band Era." He paused as the music changed in mid measure. "It's gone now, and that is Van Halen."

"I'm starting to worry about you." She left him alone to work.

"Me, too." Harold looked at his watch. It was 1:30 and he hadn't had lunch. The little diner around the corner shouldn't be too crowded now.

* * *

That afternoon at break time, he was checking out the baseball scores on his phone when he heard a sweet voice say, "Knock, knock."

He looked up and saw Paula standing outside his cube, smiling. Returning her smile, he waved her in. She leaned over his desk, her smile fading, and whispered, "Anything else happen?"

He shook his head. "Not a thing since the radio." He gestured toward the chair. "Have a seat."

She slid in the chair, crossed her legs, and smoothed her green skirt. "Good. Maybe you just need a vacation. I checked the log, and you've been working on too many projects. How much time do you have built up?"

He shrugged. "A month and a half. I didn't take much last year." *Or the year before.*

"Do you have somewhere you could go to get away from Cambridge?"

"My college roommate's been begging me to come see them in Providence, but I don't know. There's so much to do here."

"Go! Schedule it with Charles, quick. Remember he's always saying that we're better employees when we take that time." She reached toward him and then stopped.

Harold nodded. "Yeah. You're right. A vacation will do me good. I'll put in a request right after you leave. Have to be week after next to give it time for approval and arrange it with Jacob. Won't he be surprised." Harold

cheered.

“Just don’t say *fhtagn* until then, and you should be fine.” She smiled.

He shivered and decided to change the subject. “Want a granola bar? I have plenty.”

“Sure,” she said. “Contrary to my reputation, I’m a sucker for normalcy.” She leaned forward in the chair.

"Well, I *try* to be as normal as they come." *Before this week, I succeeded.*

"That's what I like about you." Her voice was very soft as if she didn't expect him to hear her but wouldn't be upset if he did.

Harold blinked and opened a drawer on the side of his desk. With a small shriek, he slammed it quickly when a tentacle flicked out. “Did you see that?”

“No. What was it?”

“A tentacle! A wet tentacle!”

He reopened it and saw nothing but the box of granola bars. He looked up at Paula. “Still want one?”

She shook her head and played with a strand of hair falling over her shoulder.

“Maybe I imagined it.”

“Then where did that water on the desk come from?” She pointed at his desk.

Harold looked where she was pointing. A streak of water proceeded from the edge of the desk over the drawer for a few inches.

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The next morning, he whistled down the hallway. A good night's sleep and planning his vacation had done him good. Maybe getting away was the biggest thing he needed. Jacob had been thrilled when Harold called to accept the invitation. Maybe everything was all in his mind. Maybe seeing the water on the desk had been due to the power of suggestion, or, more likely, he had spilled a little water without realizing it and his imagination attributed it to a tentacle. Everything had a rational explanation. It always did.

He saw Paula walking down the hallway toward him. She looked very nice today with that ruffled skirt. He waved at her and stood to the side to let her pass. "I called Jacob last night, and it's all set. I'll go there as--"

She cut him off. "Don't pull me into your insanity." Paula walked on without looking back.

Dumbfounded, he stood at the wall for a moment before returning to his cubicle without filling his coffee cup. He would just have to plow through the next few days until his vacation. He had made it this far alone. He would do so again.

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He was at his desk in the afternoon, when Paula came back. "I'm sorry about this morning. I just freaked out. You need solid a friend right now not a flake." She played with her skirt with one hand.

"I understand, and I don't think you're a flake." He pointed to the chair by the wall. "Have a seat."

She sat down gracefully and crossed her legs. "I was going to make my own sheet, but not now." They laughed. Then she did a double take. "When did you start wearing old-style hats?"

"What hat?" Surprised by the question, he looked around the desk but didn't see anything.

She pointed to the wall of his cube where he hung his coat. A navy blue Fedora hung above the coat.

Harold's arms shook, and a small whimper escaped his throat. "It wasn't here when I got back from lunch. I don't even own a hat like that." He looked at her. "What's happening to me?" His voice was soft. He put his hands under the desk to hide their shaking.

Paula put a hand on his arm. "I don't know, but maybe we can talk after work? Keep your mind off this." She raised one eyebrow at him.

Harold smiled at her. "I'd like that. Maybe over dinner? That is, if your boyfriend won't mind."

"No boyfriend." She frowned and crossed her arms. "Mr. Matthers, are you asking me out on a date?"

Harold thought for a moment. Was she being serious with the frown or playing coy? The twinkle in her eyes made him think the second. He had only one way to find out. He had been considering this for weeks and

decided it was time to try. His heart thudded in his chest as he said, "Yes, I am. I, Harold Matthers, want a date with you, Paula Bramwell. Will you go out with me to dinner this evening?"

She put one hand on her hip. "Well, since you're asking for a date, I accept!"

His anxiety turned to elation. "Meet me in the parking garage right after work. I know just the place." He blinked as a thought struck him. "The restaurant is a little distance away. What about your car? Would you prefer to drive yourself?" He hoped not. He'd like the time in the car to chat with her.

She smiled. "No worries. I ride the bus to work." She turned to leave but stopped. "You should make charm rolls more often. You've got some skill there."

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Harold pulled out a seat for her at the Crab Shack, a higher-end establishment than the name implied. Their seats were at the window, overlooking the Charles River. They started looking over the menus the waitress gave them.

"Amazing," Harold said. "They still list alcohol."

Paula looked up, her eyes wide. "What?"

"Well, with the eighteenth amendment ratified, alcohol *is* illegal. Still, it's nice to find it sometimes."

Paula shook her head and looked down at the table. "This isn't Prohibition Era, you know." She spoke quietly.

Harold felt a little short of breath. He dropped his voice, leaned forward, and said, "This isn't a speakeasy?"

Paula shook her head slowly. "We aren't even in the right century for that."

Harold looked away for a moment. He was about to say something when the waitress came for their order. It seemed like only a few minutes elapsed before their waitress placed covered plates in front of them and removed both covers at the same time. Paula expressed delight at the look of her steamed lobster. Harold, however, felt sick to his stomach. His shrimp were large, each about an ounce and a half.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“It’s the shrimp. They look like I’ve always imagined the Mi-Go to look. One night, we were up against those horrid aliens. Five of us started, but only two survived, and we were just lucky.” That was the roughest single night before the campaign against Nyrlathotep. “If a couple more rolls had gone against us, we two would’ve died, too.” He shuddered, thinking about those intelligent fungi with the many arms, wings, and shells. He held up one of the shrimp. “A little Mi-Go.”

Paula smiled. “Oh. I’ve always imagined Mi-Go to look like giant lobsters.”

“Not helping!” Harold felt a little queasy looking at her dish.

“Well, just view this as sweet revenge.” She picked up a shrimp from his plate and popped it into her mouth. “Oh, Harold, you have to try it. The taste is out of this world!”

They laughed and managed to talk about other things throughout dinner.

After he paid out, Harold walked her to his car. “Where do you live? I’ll drive you home.”

Paula bit her lip. “It’s a little ways from here. Are you sure you don’t need someone to stay with you tonight. No offense, but you look like you’re about to jump at shadows.”

“None taken. I *have* been jumping at shadows today.” He sighed. “I’d be glad for the company, but understand....”

She nodded. “Right. You need a friend. Besides, I don’t even kiss on the first date.” She winked at him.

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Harold took her into his first-floor apartment. The clock struck eight as he opened the door. For a moment, he stared at the full moon shining over the buildings.

“Expecting to see something?” Paula asked from inside.

“Yes, but I didn’t.” He followed her in.

“This is nice!” she said, looking at the clean floor and cleared table. “I won’t tell you what I expected from

a programmer's bachelor pad."

"I can imagine from what I've seen at the guys' places. That's part of why I try to keep it clean. Make yourself at home."

She threw her purse on the couch and sat down beside it. "Unless you feel like going to bed right now, we've got a couple of hours to kill."

He shook his head. "I couldn't sleep if I tried. We could play a game or watch a movie. Your call."

"Game," she said. "You pick since you know what you have."

He pulled Scrabble out of the closet and set it down on the table. They quickly set up the board and drew tiles. She played RISEN with the N placed on the middle square. The board was on a spinner so each person could rotate it on their turn and be able to see the board properly. He played KING off the I and turned the board back to Paula.

Play continued for over an hour. Paula's ability with words impressed him. His small attempts at humor during the game seemed to be taken well.

Paula played DEEP near the bottom of the board. He looked at his rack and thought. There weren't many tiles left in the bag, and the score was close. He played an O, an N, and an S crossing the DEEP to land on a triple-word score. "12 points for ONES." Even though it wasn't much, he needed to block her from scoring on the triple-word space. Then he shuddered. "I just made DEEP ONES."

The Deep Ones were monsters in the mythos that lived in the ocean off the fictional town of Innsmouth.

"That's not all," she whispered. "Apparently, I've made words, too."

Harold looked where she pointed. When she played SPORT off of his KING by tacking the S onto the end, it looked like KINGSPORT, another town from the mythos. Harold looked across the board. "ASYLUM, DREAMS, DARKNESS, CHAOS, WHISPERER, SHUNNED."

"We even made INNSMOUTH out of INNS with MOUTH right below it." She put her hand on top of his. He grabbed hold of it, anxious for human touch. He noticed her hand was trembling. "How did we miss them?" she

asked.

"I don't know, but let's keep playing." Trying to get his mind off the mythos, Harold looked down at his rack. It held E, O, M, and H. Letting go of her hand, he drew the three tiles he needed to have seven. T, D, and O. He put them on his rack with the others and shuffled the tiles. He felt the blood drain from his face as he made THE DOOM. One of the stories was "The Doom that Came to Sarnath."

He shuddered. "I hate to ask this, Paula, but what words can you make right now?"

She looked down, rearranged some letters, and shrieked. "I have a blank, and the others letters make ARKHAM." Arkham was the most famous town from the stories. Witch-cursed and legend-haunted Arkham, Massachusetts, was a center of madness that attracted evil in all its forms.

Silently, they stood up from the table. Harold picked up the board and dumped the letters back into the box. "I think it's bed time," he said.

Paula nodded, staring down at the cleared table.

"If you don't mind old sweats and a t-shirt, I have something for you."

She said nothing until he tapped her shoulder. "What?" She turned to him and leaned against him, shivering.

"You can sleep in some old clothes of mine," he said, glad for her closeness. Her perfume again filled his senses.

"Yeah. That's fine." She followed him down the hall, holding onto his shirt.

In his bedroom, he dug around in the chest of drawers until he found a pair of grey sweats and a blue t-shirt. He handed them to her and said, "I'll go fix the couch for myself."

She shook her head. "I'm too scared now. Can you sleep in here?"

"Um..." He looked at the bed then back at her. She looked tense with her shoulders stiff.

"Maybe a cot on the floor?" The shrillness in her voice begged him to stay.

"I can make something," he answered softly. She relaxed.

She went into the bathroom to change while he brought the couch cushions into the bedroom. He arranged them quickly, suddenly more tired than scared.

"Are you decent?" Paula asked at the door. Her voice sounded more chipper than just minutes before.

"As much as I can be." He tried to keep the mood light.

She came in, dressed in his old clothes. "How do I look?" she asked, holding her hands in the air and giving a little twirl. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she wore glasses now. The pants and shirt both hung loose on her. The shirt had a programming joke. "If at first you don't succeed, call it a demo."

"Magnificent." He smiled.

She laughed and smiled back. "I bet you say that to all the girls in your jammies."

Harold thought for a moment and smiled. "That statement is technically accurate."

She blushed then her smile faded. He saw her shiver and hug herself even though the room was comfortably warm. She stepped close to him and put her arms around his waist. She leaned into his shoulder. "I'm frightened. I've been playing *M&M* for five or six years and never had anything like this happen to me."

"Me neither. It's crazy scary." He paused. "Do you think you can sleep?"

She nodded but her eyes were downcast. "Don't take long changing."

"I won't." Harold grabbed his own sleeping clothes and went to the bathroom to change. Paula's work clothes lay neatly folded on the sink counter with her contact case on the top of the blouse. Even though he was only gone a few minutes, Paula was curled up in his bed asleep when he returned. He blew her a kiss and lay down on the couch cushions. He pulled the blankets up to his chin and quickly drifted off to sleep.

* * *

In the middle of the night, Harold awoke to find the bed empty. His heart started beating fast as he wondered what happened to Paula. As his imagination ran wild, he reined it in. A glance at the alarm clock told him

the time was a little after 4:30. He could see a light underneath the bedroom door. Heart thudding in his chest, he opened the door and peeked out.

Paula sat at his kitchen table, scribbling a note. She wore her clothes from the prior evening but still had her glasses and ponytail. The contrast struck him.

He tapped on the wall as he entered so as not to startle her when he spoke. "Couldn't sleep?"

She jumped.

"Sorry. I tried not to startle you."

"Yeah. Didn't work. Not your fault. I'm just really jumpy." Her fingers drummed on the table.

The silence hung in the room for a moment. "But, still, what are you doing?" He sat down in the chair next to her.

She handed him the note. "I woke in the night and remembered that I have a big meeting first thing in the morning. I can't show up wearing yesterday's clothes." She smiled. "So I'm going to go home to finish out the night. You were sleeping so well I didn't want to wake you."

"I'll take you to your place. Just give me a minute to change."

"No worries," she interrupted. "I already called a cab. You need sleep more than I need to see what a gentleman you are." She poked him in the chest.

"Can you sleep at your place by yourself?"

She shrugged. "I can't go back to sleep here, so I might as well go home." She looked away. "Besides the crazy stuff only seems to happen around you. If I'm home, nothing should happen." She looked back at him. "Will you be okay the rest of the night?"

He nodded. "I think so."

"I don't want to run out on you. If you need me to stay..."

"No." He shook his head and tried to smile. "I'll be fine."

A cab pulled up in the street. When he walked her to the door, she turned and kissed him on the lips. “I thought you didn’t kiss on the first date,” he said, surprised.

“I make an exception for guys that I’m facing other-worldly horrors with.” She blushed and bit her lip. Then she said, “but only if the horror is in real life.”

Harold pulled her close and gave her another kiss. She rested against him for a moment before whispering, “Meter’s running.” He watched her get in the cab and ride away. She waved as the cab pulled away from the curb.

Feeling strangely content, Harold went to his bedroom, set his clock radio, and lay down. His pillow smelled like lilies. He smiled and drifted off to an easy sleep.

* * *

Harold woke up to the clanging bells of an alarm clock. His hand fumbled for it, closed on the metal, and flipped the switch to cut it off before the neighbors complained. *Metal?* He sat up and looked at the clock. It was round and made of red metal instead of black plastic. Instead of the glowing red numbers and snooze button he expected, metal hands ticked across the face.

Furtively looking around, everything in the apartment looked old. No, not old but old fashioned. A water radiator hung on the wall under the window. Out the window, he saw an iron fire escape. *Fire escape?* He lived on the ground floor. Looking out the window, he saw he was now on the third floor of a red-brick apartment building.

Clothes from a fashion almost one hundred years old hung peacefully in the closet. Everything looked like the 1920s. Every familiar personal item was gone. No cell phone, no laptop. Nothing.

He took a deep breath. Okay. With the events of the last few days, being transported in time wasn't as much of a surprise as it might be otherwise. Wasn't there even a mythos tale about time travel? If not a story then it definitely happened in a module of *Mythos & Madness*. He needed to find out why he had been transported and how to get back. He doubted he would find the answers in his apartment, so he got dressed and ready to face the day. He made sure he had money in his pocket, walked down the stairs, and went out the door. After all, the players in *M&M* were called “investigators.”

The streets were dusty and narrower than they had been the night before. Horse drawn cabs were plentiful but old-looking cars just barely outnumbered them. A skinny newspaper boy in a brown cap and moth-eaten coat stood at the corner. Harold smiled as he realized that the newspaper would give him the exact date.

The boy waved at him. "Morning, Professor Armitage."

"What did you call me?" Harold's blood ran cold.

"Oh, right," the boy said. "You asked me to call you 'Richard.' Sorry about that. Got your paper." He held out a folded paper.

Professor Richard Armitage--the name of his favorite character to play in the game. Trying to suppress a shiver, he took the paper and dug coins from his pocket. "Any price changes?"

"No." The boy looked at him strangely. "Same two pennies as always. Just like yesterday and the day before. You're one of my regulars, you know." He took the money. "You're acting stranger than usual, Richard. Oh, that reminds me. I got one of those magazines I always hold one for you. There's a new Robert Blake story in it, 'Feaster From the Stars.' Another two bits."

Blake? Feaster? That story and writer existed only in the mythos as versions of Robert Bloch and his classic *Shambler From the Stars*. His breath catching in his chest, he exchanged more money for the magazine and unfolded the paper. Across the top, it read *The Arkham Advertiser*. Friday, October 2, 1925.

Harold gulped. "Thank you," and hurried back to his apartment. He wasn't in Cambridge or even Boston. In fact, where he was didn't even exist on real maps. He wasn't surprised with everything that had happened, but it was still disconcerting. To travel in time was one thing. To go to a place that didn't exist was another.

Spreading the paper out on his kitchen table, he looked it over. The first thing that caught his eye was that tonight was the full moon. *Naturally*. He thumbed through the rest of the paper, looking for clues. *M&M* scenarios often provided clues in period newspapers. An ad seeking a renter of an old house tickled the back of his mind as familiar. A story on the second page reported how two men were found in a road with horn wounds and hoof prints. He remembered that both of those were events from mythos tales. Actually, the one about the two men had been one of the tales he considered low quality.

Putting aside that paper, he looked around his apartment more closely. He realized it was just like he had always imagined it in the game. He took an apartment instead of a house as it was his first semester in Arkham and he wasn't sure he wanted to stay. He had infact been looking for a house when Nyarlathotep killed him.

Two books on the shelf caught his eye. *A Handbook of Chemical Engineering Volume I and II* by George E. Davis. Those were the classics in the field for this era. He *was* Armitage. A memory surfaced, and he pressed on a certain knothole in the shelf. It opened a hidden compartment behind the shelf. Reaching inside, he found *Turba Philosophorum*, a very powerful book on alchemy. He had been so pleased when he found it in the game, but now he whimpered and closed the compartment. An alchemy book was very fitting for a chemical engineer, but it gave a new sense of realism to the situation. Were other tomes real here? Was burning them an option?

He sat down, clutching his chest, and looked for the telephone. He needed to call the University and cancel all of his classes and appointments. He might be an investigator, but his SAN score had taken enough hits this morning.

Now, where was the phone? He looked in the small kitchen and the living room. Nothing. Not even a place for a phone. Then he remembered that apartment buildings in this time didn't have phone lines to each apartment (at least, that's what his Lorekeeper had said). Instead, the better--more expensive--buildings had a phone for each floor out in the hallway. He opened his door, looked both ways, and hurried to the alcove with the phone.

* * *

After convincing the departmental secretary at Miskatonic University that he was too sick to come in, Harold managed to hide all day in his apartment. She had stubbornly refused to cancel his classes, but he coughed, hacked, and sneezed into the phone until she agreed. Somehow, he had persuaded her. He sat at the small kitchen table holding a loaded revolver.

"Professor Armitage?" called a woman's voice from the door.

He shook slightly. "Yes?" He cocked the gun.

"It's your landlady, Miss Haddad. Did you not go to work today?" She had an accent that he couldn't place even though her grammar was excellent.

"No. I was on my way and suddenly didn't feel well. I feel better now." *And I'd feel even better if you would leave me alone!* This trip to the past didn't give him any memories of Armitage.

"Well, come on down to the diner. It's usually closed for supper, but I'm looking to open it and need to try some recipes. If you'll try them, it'll be on the house."

His stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten all day. The lady sounded nice. He decided to eat. "Thank you, Miss Haddad. I greatly appreciate that." He uncocked the gun, slipped it into his coat pocket, and opened the door.

Miss Haddad was a dainty, swarthy-skinned woman. Her dark eyes were lustrous and wide. From her name, looks, and accent, he guessed her to be an immigrant from the Middle East. She wore a brown dress that was form fitting but modest. A white head band held her hair in place, and a turquoise scarab decorated a necklace hanging around her graceful neck. At ease, he followed her to a diner next to the apartment building.

Finding a seat at the counter, he picked up a menu. "Do I need to look at this, or are you just going to bring me the experiments, Miss Haddad?"

"I'll just bring them," she smiled prettily. "And you must call me by my first name if you are eating my food like this. Call me Sekhmet."

"That is a lovely name. May I ask where it's from? It sounds familiar."

"It's a very old Egyptian name. Sekhmet was the goddess of fire, war, medicine, and vengeance."

"That's quite the portfolio she possessed! Didn't she get tired?" Harold laughed to show he was joking.

Sekhmet laughed with him. "You are funny, professor. I would like it if you came here more often."

"Seeing as how we bachelors don't like our own cooking, I'll have to try."

"Yes, but you are always in such a rush to the university. You only come here on Saturday." Sekhmet pouched her bottom lip out. She looked adorable.

Harold relaxed. She seemed nice and polite. He'd have to be careful in the conversation and steer any topic away from what they might have talked about on his prior visits to this diner. He tossed the menu down on the

counter top. He read the name of the diner from it--Sekhmet's, naturally. The cover portrayed a picture of an Egyptian statue of a woman with a lioness' head.

Sekhmet placed a bowl of rice, vegetables, and a little beef in front of him. It smelled terrific and tasted just as good. To his surprise, the rice was actually a small pasta. With a growl, his stomach reminded him again that he hadn't eaten all day. He dove into the bowl with relish. It was very good.

She chatted with him while he ate, asking questions about the food and if the diner seemed like a supper place. The decorations currently were aimed more for lunch and breakfast, but he told her that could easily be made more universal. Taking the roosters off the wall would be a great first step.

"One more thing, Professor Armitage," she said. "Dessert!" She placed a round cake with chocolate frosting in front of him.

"That looks delicious!"

She handed him the knife. "Please do the honors of cutting it yourself."

He put the knife over the cake just as the middle collapsed. "Oh!" he exclaimed.

"Not again!" she said with a pout. "I just can't make it so that the center holds."

He stared at her. "That's a very peculiar way to word it." Her smile seemed malevolent now. He felt the blood drain from his face. "The center... cannot hold!" A line from the mythos! He fell back off of his stool and to the cold, tile floor.

Miss Sekhmet Haddad came around the counter. The dainty woman seemed to tower over him as he crab-crawled away from her. Her shirt pulled tight and rippled as if something was trying to bust out from the back and fog billowed from under her skirt. When she spoke, her voice was deeper. "I'm going to enjoy killing you, Professor Armitage. I'm going to enjoy it just as much as the first time." She showed him a fanged smile as her neck lengthened.

"The first time? Nyarlathotep!" He finally managed to get to his feet and ran for the door. He pulled over a cart of plates, hoping to slow her down. He burst through the door and away.

* * *

Harold tore down the sidewalk. Was he imagining things or did the man in the heavy coat have a shambling walk like someone from Innsmouth? The full moon hung over the streets. A black shape winged its way across the moon's face. Was that a Mi-Go? Maybe a night gaunt? It didn't matter; both were deadly. Where could he go to get away?

"In here, Harold," called a man. Harold looked around, frantic. A man with a black, heavy beard and ringlet hair waved him into a store.

Harold ducked inside, and the man slammed the door closed and locked it behind him. Harold tried to catch his breath. Looking around, he saw he was in a pawn shop. On the shelf beside him was a ring shaped like a thrice-coiled serpent. A piece of jewelry with a black stone sat beside it. Next to the jewel was an old pair of small, low-heeled, black shoes with silver buckles. Harold recognized the jewel and ring but not the shoes. Over to the side was a shelf full of musty tomes which Harold wouldn't even look at. He closed his eyes and whimpered. *Out of the frying pan and into the fire.* But running was out of the question; after all, where could he go. Sekhmet waited outside.

The shop owner said, "Lucky for you. I was just about to close up to go to services."

"It's Friday evening," Harold said. "I'm not that crazy yet."

"I'm Jewish. Our Shabbat services are on Friday night."

"Oh, right. Then you'd better go."

"Not yet. Helping someone in need is more important than Shabbat services. How can I serve HaShem if I do not help those made in his image?"

"That... that... *thing* isn't in his image." He pointed out window toward where he last saw the human form of Nyarlathotep.

Joshua looked out the window. "I see Sekhmet. Wow. That *is* a horrid mask he chose this time." He turned to Harold and held out his hand. "I'm Joshua, by the way. Since you're in my shop, how can I help you?" He spread

his hands in welcome.

“I want to get away from that thing?” With everything else he had seen today, Harold was only a little surprised that Joshua knew about Nyarlathotep and his masks.

Joshua raised one eyebrow at him. “Is that what you truly want to know?”

Harold shook his head. “I don't know if this will make any sense to you, but I really want to get back to my own life.”

“It makes perfect sense. Now, this is going to sound cliché, but you have to face your fears. And once you do, nothing will be the same again.”

Harold shuddered, thinking of the lurking fear outside the door. “I can't do that. I can't face the Crawling Chaos again. He takes great joy in killing me.”

Joshua chuckled. “Have faith, Harold.” He leaned back against the counter.

“Faith! Faith in what? I'm a normal guy--okay I'm not normal but close enough for how long I'd last against the Big N! But you are.”

“Yep, completely normal human being right here in the Roaring 20s who happens to know about Nyarlathotep, your real name, and that you have a job that doesn't yet exist-computer programming.” He counted the items on his fingers.

Harold shivered. “That's right. I didn't even tell you! How *did* you know?” Harold tried to scuttle away but fell. He grabbed a silver platter from the shelf next to him and held it in front of himself.

Chuckling, Joshua shook his head. “Put the tray down, Harold. Honestly, if I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead.”

“But if you wanted to scare me out of my wits, this would be a great way to do it.” Harold put the tray back where he got it.

“True, but I don't scare people without reason. I believe very much in order.” Joshua gave Harold a comforting smile.

"Okay, then. If you aren't trying to scare me, tell me how you knew to call me 'Harold.' Everyone else here calls me 'Richard Armitage.'"

"I know more things than you can ever imagine, Harold. Armitage is a good name if you want to pick something mythosesque."

Harold shrugged. Whoever this Joshua guy was, Harold decided to stop wondering how he knew things he shouldn't. "I'm just glad no one here is calling me 'Jermyn.'"

Joshua took a deep breath. "I have *always* hated that story. All the mythos being about the lack of purpose and accidental state of humanity, I can read those. They're no more an eye roller than the *Gilgamesh Epic* or *Enuma Elish*. If you know--truly and deeply know--the truth, a lie has no power. Howard believed the cosmos was too terrible to comprehend. That's backwards as the beauties of the cosmos are too wonderful to comprehend! But *that* story? I rank it with the writings of the Nicolatians."

The who? Harold wondered. "Is trusting you my only way out?"

"Yep. But getting back to your present isn't the only thing to be concerned with. You'll still have to deal with your problems then."

Harold nodded. "I am going to destroy every piece of mythos material I have."

"Don't overreact." Joshua waved off his concerns. "It's not just the mythos. This never happened to you when you were almost obsessed with the mythos. You thought the mythos could fill a void that it was never meant to fill."

Harold cocked his head to the side. "The mythos has a purpose?"

Joshua grinned. "Yes. Ironic isn't it?" His grin faded. "What about your job? It frustrates you, but can you come to peace with it? After all, you are a good programmer."

Harold looked down. "I used to enjoy it. I really did. Now I think I hate it."

"Do you hate programming itself, or the situation you're in?" Joshua didn't wait for an answer. "Think on that. Everything has a purpose. What might the purpose of that job be?"

Harold thought for a moment. "I truly don't know."

"Well, while you think about it, I've got a small quest for you."

Harold winced. "I'm not surprised. Fetch quest?" That meant that Harold would have to bring a specified item to Joshua. They were common in many games.

Joshua nodded. "Yep. Where we are is something of a shared hallucination or dream. Some powerful entities started it." He waved his hands around.

"Nyarlathotep?"

"He's one of them," Joshua said with a nod. "The entities can't *really* create a reality, so they make a pocket universe--as the sci-fi stories call it. They use this place as an amusement park and storage facility. I visit regularly to keep an eye on things and gather relics for safekeeping. You noticed some of them." He waved his hands at the shelves.

Harold didn't look over to the shelves. "I saw the ring of Thoth-Amon and a piece of the black monolith but I don't recognize the shoes."

Joshua said, "They aren't from a direct mythos story, but it was still a ghost story, a *really* good ghost story. If you ever get the chance to listen to "Goody Two Shoes" with Vincent Price as the narrator, take it. I collect other things, too." He held out two, green, ten-sided dice.

"The Colonel and Sarge! How did you find them? I thought they were lost in the moving van."

"They were, but lost things tend to make their way to my shop." He gestured around.

A lightbulb went off over Harold's head. He said, "You gather mythos relics. You want my--*Armitage's*--copy of *Turba Philosophorum*. If I bring it, will you send me home?"

Joshua nodded. "That's not all I want. There are some things they have that I lock up and things they have stolen from the real world that I send back. Your job is to get back the *Book of Kells*."

Harold closed his eyes. "I'm not familiar with that tome. What mythos tale speaks of it?"

Joshua's eyes flashed in anger. "It's real. It's a copy of the Gospels in Latin, bound in four volumes. It's called an illuminated manuscript because it seeks to bring light into the darkness. They stole them from Trinity College in Dublin just hours ago. Bring me *Turba Philosophorum* and the *Book of Kells*, and then you can go home." Joshua looked grim. "One more thing--don't be afraid."

* * *

Don't be afraid? Harold thought incredulously as he slipped out the back door of Joshua's and down the dark alley. Sekhmet had shown no sign of leaving the front of the shop.

Joshua had given him directions to a cave outside of town where Nyarlathotep usually hid out. Not that the police or anyone could stop him. He just hid out to slowly spread the insanity instead of taking down the whole town at once. He had more fun that way.

Harold pulled the coat tight and hat down over his eyes. Joshua had provided them as a disguise. It wasn't a great disguise, but it would do. As he exited the alley, he turned towards his apartment. This street wouldn't take him past Nyarlathotep. He didn't think he could survive the heart attack if he got that close.

Standing under a lamp for a moment, Harold wondered if Nyarlathotep had things out looking for him. There were too many other people on the streets for any hunter to assume just because someone was out that it was Harold. Harold turned right instead of going straight ahead. A circuitous route made more sense to him.

Something screeched overhead. No one else on the street seemed to notice, so Harold kept walking. He did his best to not even pull the coat tighter.

A fog drifted in from the river, adding to the chill in the air. Arkham was laid out almost on a grid. Everything lined up perfectly. Running from Sekhmet's dinner had taken him to the southern and eastern part of town, almost to Christchurch Cemetery. His apartment was back on W. Saltonstall St., only four streets south of the campus. He made his way north to Pickman St., shuddered when he saw the street sign, and turned back to High St. If anyone was watching him, going that far north only to turn back south might seem suspicious.

Harold decided his route was circuitous enough already. He went straight for his apartment building, through the door, up the narrow stairs and into the apartment.

Once there, Harold grabbed a flashlight. He didn't dare turn on the lights. Even if he hadn't been followed, the baddies knew where he lived. He took a knapsack and started stuffing it with his--*Armitage's*--adventuring gear. The alchemy book went in first as he wouldn't need it till the end. Then a crowbar, rope, and dark lantern. Reconsidering, he put the crowbar in his belt. It doubled as a tool and a weapon.

Speaking of weapons, he made sure the handgun was fully loaded and put it in his coat pocket. The box of ammo went where he could reach it easily. It wasn't full, but the count seemed close to what he remembered it was supposed to be. A canteen and beef jerky went on top. Joshua's instructions took him north of the city for a mile or so.

Now, he just needed to figure out how to get where he was going. Walking through town with a knapsack at night would attract attention. He supposed he could carry the bag under the front of his coat until he got out of town. He's appear to have an incredible potbelly, but that was better than attracting the wrong kind of attention.

His heart thudding in his chest, he took a moment to breath. Most times in the game, he was with a group of 4-6. Even when he went alone to do research or run an errand, he knew the other Irregulars were working towards the same goal. Here, it was just him. Maybe Joshua was on his side? But, no, Joshua seemed... out of the game somehow. He wasn't playing as much as directing Harold on where to go. Was Joshua the Lore Keeper for wherever this place was?

Harold shivered in the cold apartment and thought about what else Joshua had told him. He needed to make peace with programming, Joshua had said. How could he do that? The job drove him crazy! Everyone needed their bug fix right away. The field was constantly shifting. He barely had time to learn one code library when another came along. Or even better, the first company released a new version incompatible with the old code. Such were the ways of geeks. *M&M* wasn't the only place he lost sanity.

But coding had its rewards. He helped people get their jobs done faster than they ever could before.

A shuffling sound in the hallway broke through his thoughts. He pulled the knapsack on and readied the gun. *Mythos & Madness* players stayed ready for action or died horribly.

Something heavy crashed against the door, breaking it in two. Harold fired twice without waiting to see

what it was. At this time of night anyone breaking down the door was unfriendly. Come to think of it, breaking down the door at any time of the day qualified the visitor as unfriendly.

Something that looked like an albino, hairless ape with a long muzzle thudded to the floor. More stood behind it. Ghouls! Not wasting more time, Harold ran for the window. He quickly opened it and fled via the fire escape. He stormed down the iron steps to the second floor. The ladder from this level to the ground was stuck about half way. He went down as far as he could and dropped the rest of the way to the ground.

Looking back, he saw the ghouls coming out of his apartment window. They were slow, but that didn't mean he should slow down *at all*. He ran through the alley behind his building and away.

His plan to put the knapsack under the front of his coat was thrown out the window because it required him to not be seen before starting out. If the ghouls gave a description to their masters, it would include his coat. Even more importantly, he didn't want to stop even long enough to make that small change. He's just have to risk looking odd. Then again, this was Arkham; odd in Cambridge might seem like a slow Tuesday in Arkham. He would, though, walk.

Thick clouds covered the moon and most of the stars in the darkest night he could remember. The air was thick and hung over him like a heavy coat. Not that he expected this to be a pleasant walk on the beach.

He now needed to go straight north and across the Miskatonic River. Trying to hurry without looking like he was hurrying, he passed the red-brick buildings of the university. The towers hung back from the street amidst dark trees. Green ivy crawled up the sides of the buildings. Ah, the joys he'd had in the game researching in that very library. The school was on par with Harvard and even excelled them in certain areas; especially in the rare book collection.

He needed to think about something besides the ghouls from his apartment or the university or anything related to where he was right now. What could be his purpose in programming? He used to love it. Maybe the answer was in what he loved about it then. He loved how he was on the cutting edge of technology. He loved how he transformed raw data into a manageable form that others could use.

Thick fog rose from the river as Harold came to the bridge. He couldn't see anything below the planks. Still

trying to act nonchalant, he walked across the wooden bridge with stone pillars.

Something moved in the water below, hitting the stone support with a wet thwump.

Harold didn't wait to see what made that sound. He scurried across the bridge.

* * *

Nothing but owls interrupted the rest of his journey. Once outside town, he took a drink of water and then kept going.

It took him two hours of hard walking, but he found the cave. He sighed as his imagination turned the cave mouth into a real mouth. The stalagmites and stalactites looking just like the teeth of some giant monster.

He went into the cave and started creeping forward. The Crawling Chaos might be anywhere ahead. Undoubtedly, he had something watching for intruders.

The chill air hung in damp clumps around him as he went deeper into the cave. He pulled one slit open on his dark lantern.

Hours went past as Harold slipped through the cave. He was prepared for the worst, but nothing happened. Every time he turned a corner or crept down a slope without anything happening, his paranoia increased a notch.

Seeing light spilling from around the corner ahead of him, Harold closed the open slot on his lantern. He slunk to the ground and slithered forward. Peeking around the corner, he saw a tall, swarthy-skinned man in a yellow robe. A flat rock in front of him held four bound volumes. Around him were winged aliens with many arms each. They looked like giant lobsters or shrimp. *Oh, joy*, he thought. *Everything I need is in one place: Nyarlathotep, the Book of Kells, and Mi-Go.*

Harold considered how to get the book. Joshua hadn't given him a time limit, so he could wait. Nyarlathotep couldn't stay here forever. But, then, neither could Harold. How would he get the book?

The decision was taken from him when a staff slammed into his back, knocking him to the ground. Blows rained down from above. One of the Mi-Go picked him up by the arm and hauled him to the tall man. Harold panted, relieved that the beating was over.

"We found an intruder, Lord Nyarlathotep." The Mi-Go slowly bowed his head before the man as if he were addressing a king or god.

Nyarlathotep snarled. "We meet again, Professor Richard Armitage. How are things in the engineering department at Miskatonic University?"

"No." Harold shook his head forcefully. "My name is Harold Matthers. I live in Cambridge, in the real world. Joshua wants that book back."

Veins bulging in his neck, Nyarlathotep clenched his fists. "*He* sent another one for a relic. I almost don't believe it, but, when you've gone up against Joshua as many times as I have, you learn he doesn't give up. He should know by now that I don't either."

Harold looked at the evil being in front of him. "Another? But you just took the book a few hours ago."

Nyarlathotep laughed with an ugly sound like a wheeze. "It's not the first relic I've taken. Joshua sends people after most of them, Richard." He smiled horribly and pointed to a pile of human bones in the corner.

"My name is Harold." Harold struggled fruitlessly between the Mi-Go. "Why do you want the *Book of Kells*?" His writhing accomplished nothing except the Mi-Go tightening their grips.

Nyarlathotep opened the book to a page of script with lavish decorations. The first letter of the first paragraph on each page was decorated. The facing page had a man on a throne with four other men, two on each side. All were seated. Drawings of knots framed the seated figures. "Celtic knotwork is very old magic, so old it isn't even considered magic anymore. This spell keeps some of my brethren, the Outer Gods, out of the real world."

"And you want to unleash them."

Nyarlathotep's smile dripped evil. "And to do so, all I need is to get rid of you."

"You can't break the spell while I'm here?"

"Your presence in the cave disrupts the mystical energies I need. I could kill you right now, but you've shown spunk tonight. You came after me even after I almost killed you at Sekhmet's. Join me, and I'll give you wealth beyond your wildest dreams, Richard."

Harold didn't correct Nyarlathotep on the name. He had done so twice already. *What would be the point?*

Nyarlathotep walked around the room. The floor cracked a little under every step. "You will never have to work again. You can live where ever and do whatever with whomever. You can have your choice of women. I could even conjure one up for you. Do you like redheads?" He gestured and the image of a tall redhead with an hourglass figure began to take shape from the air between Harold and Nyarlathotep.

The image of a blank-faced woman stared straight ahead without blinking. Her white dress came to just above the knee. A black belt pulled the waist tight. Silver bracelets jangled at her wrists as she fluffed out her hair and took a step towards Harold. Nyarlathotep snapped his fingers and she came to life.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Abigail, but I want you to call me Abbie, just like my friends do. We can be friends, can't we?" She tilted her head to one side as she asked.

Harold blushed a little. Was Nyarlathotep trying to embarrass him, throw him off his game? "No," he said. "I prefer the real thing." Nothing would distract him from getting home.

"Oh, that's right. You have a girl--a blonde." With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the image. He waved again and an image of Paula appeared. The image wore a flattering, black dress of 1920's fashion and smiled at him immediately.

Nyarlathotep continued, "Paula won't have to work either. The two of you can winter in Hawaii, visit Rome, Paris, Athens, Cairo, Kenya, London, Sydney, Shanghai, or anywhere you choose. Here or what you think of as the real world, you will be free to come and go as you choose."

'Paula' looked around the cave then at Harold. She played with a cameo pinned to her dress. "Richard, wherever you are is where I want to be." She walked gracefully to Harold and reached for his hand.

Bemused, Harold took her hand. He expected to pass through it, but he felt warm flesh with bones beneath. "This can't be real." But she looked and felt real. Even her walk was like Paula's.

"She's as real as you want her to be. This is a sample of my power. She can talk, act, and be just like the Paula Bramwell you know." Nyarlathotep smiled, wickedly. "If you prefer, we can bring in that Paula and offer her a

place here. With her mythos knowledge, Lorekeeper Barbie would be an excellent addition to my organization.”

The idea tickled the back of Harold’s mind. Paula by his side and money without worries sounded like a dream, but part of him wondered. If the alien in front of him was anything like the one in the mythos, he hated humanity and whatever he offered would be toxic. Nyarlathotep held all humanity in contempt, none more so than those foolish enough to worship him.

Nyarlathotep pushed on. "You need never program again. No more Passport. No more Peak."

‘Paula’ smiled at him. The smile looked just like Paula’s. “You can do this, Richard. Imagine the fun we’ll have here in the world of the mythos.” She leaned in to kiss him.

Harold dodged her lips as well as he was able being held by the Mi-Go. She kissed his cheek. When she leaned away, he glared at Nyarlathotep, his anger boiling. This *thing* claimed to be the same entity that killed him in the game and then tried to kill him again. It couldn’t actually want to benefit him. "That you want me to stop programming is enough for me to keep at it."

‘Paula’ snapped, “Wrong answer!” Frowning, she snatched her hand back from his, slapped him, and stomped over to stand next to Nyarlathotep.

One of the Mi-Go put a blade at his throat. The lobster-like alien chittered--a surprisingly angry sound.

Even as he felt the blade prick his skin, Harold kept speaking. “You hate me programming because that is orderly. I take the chaos of raw data and order it as needed.”

Nyarlathotep stepped closer to him and peered down. "I give you one more chance to join us." Harold’s captor growled, and ‘Paula’ crossed her arms over her chest.

Harold started to shake his head but decided against it as he felt the blade at his throat. "No. You don't scare me anymore. You have no power over me. Joshua said he is a being of order and so am I! That’s why you hate me!"

The Mi-Go kept hold of Harold, but Nyarlathotep and ‘Paula’ stepped back.

"I know why you haven't killed me," Harold said. "You can't. As long as I was afraid, you could, but not now. You feed off of fear. Now, get away from me!"

The Mi-Go released him and slunk off with the others. 'Paula' faded from view, but Nyarlathotep stared down at Harold.

Harold shouted up at him. "You can't kill me in this world. If you could, you would have already. You killed others because they believed you could. I *know*--deeply know--better. You may have made this pocket universe, but it's your prison as well."

Nyarlathotep said, "I can cross between the worlds at any time. I can act within the other world. That's how I got Joshua's precious *Book of Kells*."

"Did you? Or did you use some stupid cultists to do your bidding? I heard enough things back there in the real world to doubt my sanity, but I never saw anything more substantial than a hat and a tentacle."

"You should fear tentacles, Richard. They can do terrible things!" Nyarlathotep snarled and waved his hands at Harold.

Unfazed, Harold corrected him. "I tell you again, my name is Harold Matthers! Do not call me Richard Armitage!"

Nyarlathotep's arms transformed, losing their rigidity with his fingers melting together into the end of tentacles, and lashed out at Harold. Great, bat-like wings spread behind his back.

Harold didn't flinch as the tentacles whipped past his head. Nyarlathotep's second swipe went over his head. "Give it up, Nyarlathotep. I've turned down your offer several times now. Kill me and be done with it. That is, if you can." Harold opened his shirt and pointed to his heart. "There. Strike or go away. Either way, end this charade!"

Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos, screamed in impotent rage and disappeared.

* * *

Breathless, Harold pushed open the door to Joshua's Pawn Shop. The bag on his back had *Turba Philosophorum* and all four volumes of the *Book of Kells*. He heard Joshua talking to someone but couldn't hear anything from the other person. Looking towards the back, Harold saw Joshua talking into an old candlestick phone.

Of course, it was an old style, but probably only a few years old.

"Don't cite the Old Magic to me, Nyarlathotep!" He looked up at Harold and waved. "Yeah. He's here with the books. He won fair and square. You lose again." Joshua hung up the receiver and smiled at Harold. "Set those down on the counter." He walked to the counter.

Harold put the bag next to the cash register and took the books out.

Joshua moved the *Turba Philosophorum* to the side and lovingly picked up the first volume of the *Book of Kells*. He opened it and showed the illustration to Harold. The page had a man in the middle of a knotwork frame. The man held a book in his left hand and had his right hand in his robe. Harold gave a low whistle. Joshua nodded. "Beautiful, isn't it? This is The Gospel According to Matthew. I've always loved how he starts out with the genealogy. What better way to establish the Lion of Judah has come?" He gently closed the book. "This belongs to everyone, but Trinity College will keep a good eye on it."

"Why do you want the other book?"

Joshua looked up. "To keep it out of the wrong hands. I'll put it with the other tomes, and that will be that." He waved in the general direction of the shelf of old books. "The less of these books there are floating around, the better both this shared dream and the real world will be. Nyarlathotep and his ilk can't do anything to this shop no matter how much they try."

An idea struck him. "You're the opposite of Nyarlathotep."

Joshua's face clouded for a moment. "In many ways, we are opposites. In many more, we can't even be compared. He revels in chaos. He represents it and spreads it. I am orderly and have been my entire existence."

Harold cocked his head. The phrasing of Joshua's answer seemed odd. Most people would have said 'my whole life' or 'since I was born,' but Joshua had shown himself to be anything but normal this night. In fact, he spoke more like someone from the 21st century than a 1920s pawn shop owner. "He said that most of your agents don't make it back with what they went after. Is that true?"

"Did he actually say 'most'?"

Harold thought for a moment. "No. He implied it."

Joshua shook his head sadly. "Some make it back; some don't. If they do as I say, they make it back. Is there anything else he told you?"

Harold nodded and bit his lip. "Nyarlathotep said the knotwork in the drawings do magic that bind some of the Outer Gods away from Earth. You say this is a special book but not magical."

Joshua raised an eyebrow. "It's my word against his, then. Think this through before you decide. Who do you trust?"

Harold chuckled and answered immediately. "I trust the one who hasn't tried to kill me multiple times. Beyond that, if it does keep the Outer Gods away from earth, that's a good thing."

Joshua laughed. His laughter was contagious, and soon, Harold was laughing with him.

"You didn't need me to get these books for you."

Joshua's grin was infectious. "No. *You* needed it. I'll get the books back to Dublin before they're even missed. Before I send you home, though, I want to talk to you about a new opportunity."

Harold winced. He just wanted to go home badly, but he would listen. "I'm all ears."

"I've got a cadre of people in the real world who work against Nyarlathotep and his ilk. We need a programmer to sort through and organize the data our field agents are returning and keep Nyarlathotep's men out of our system."

"You need a cadre?" Harold wasn't sure what to make of Joshua, but somehow he knew that Joshua didn't need a programmer.

Joshua grinned. "Need, no. Make use of, yes. It's dangerous, but you would fit right in. You'll be doing this on top of your day job, at least at first." He held out a business card that said, "Joshua's Pawn Shop. Buy. Sell. Trade." There was no address, but a phone number adorned the bottom.

Harold yawned as the night's events caught up with him. He had been operating on adrenaline for hours. The crash was not just coming but here. "Okay. Joshua, I'm in." He took the proffered card.

"Glad to hear it." Joshua patted his shoulder and held out two green dice. "You can take these with you when you go home."

Harold held up his hand in the stop gesture. "No. The Colonel and Sarge have served me well, but it's time they go somewhere else. Besides, I don't think I'll be playing much anymore."

"Why don't you lie down on the cot in the back? You can take a rest before I send you home." He turned Harold toward the back room.

Harold said, "I think I will." He trudged to the cot and lay down. He was almost asleep before closing his eyes.

* * *

Harold sat up in his own bed with the clock radio buzzing. His eyes darted around the room before they fell on the glowing red digits of the clock. He saw the laptop in the corner and the bookshelf with the contemporary novels. Sighing in relief, he grabbed his phone from next to the bed and checked the date. It read "Saturday." He didn't know if Friday's events had really happened or if he had slept through it and dreamed. He lay back for a moment and could smell Paula's perfume on his pillow.

Paula! He sat up. She needed to know he was okay, but he didn't have her number. He might be able to track her down online, but he wasn't a creeper and didn't intend to start now. He lay back down. She had mentioned running a game at the Pit. Maybe she would be there tonight. Wouldn't she be surprised to hear this story?

After a few minutes just lying in bed enjoying the normality, he got up. His stomach rumbled, and he knew he was having breakfast before showering today. He poured milk on a bowl of Cheerios with fresh blueberries. As he sat down to eat, his eyes fell on a folded-up newspaper that wasn't there Thursday night. Trembling, he opened it and saw across the top *The Arkham Advertiser*. A pulp magazine in very good condition fell out of it. The cover advertised Robert Blake's "Feaster From the Stars."

Harold's hands shook even more as he removed a business card sticking out of the top of the magazine. It had a third line that he hadn't seen in the pawn shop because it could only be seen when the light hit it just right.

Joshua's Pawn Shop

Buy, Sell, Trade

Change Your Life

* * *

Harold stood next to the table, putting personal items into a cardboard box. A picture of his parents went in next to a coffee mug given to him by his best friend from high school. He didn't even remember keeping that, but there it was. He looked up when he heard a knock at the door.

"Harold?" Paula called.

"Coming!" he replied. He hurried to the door, relieved that she had come here.

"Stop!" He heard the distinctive clack of a shotgun being cocked. "Open the door slowly. I need to see that it's you."

He did as she said and poked his hand out first. Then he stuck his head out. "Satisfied?" He opened the door the rest of the way.

"Yeah." She lowered the gun and walked in.

"Nice double barrel," he said. "That's one of the most powerful weapons in the game."

"Exactly why I brought it. Besides, who has a good translation of the Necronomicon laying around?" She grinned and leaned the gun against the wall. She saw the box on the table. "Oh, are you packing?" Her eyes were as big as saucers and her shoulders tightened.

"Not to move away. It's just time I made that cubicle more my own." He put an arm around her waist.

Her eyes returned to normal size and her back relaxed. "Speaking of work, Charlie was livid when you didn't show up yesterday. He called, but you didn't answer."

"Five messages from the office were on my phone." He bit his lip.

"Five! Did he leave his home number?" Her eyes were wide again.

"Not once," he said, shaking his head.

"What are you going to do?" She shuffled her feet, nervously.

"Be at work *very early* Monday morning so I can talk to him." It was more than needing to keep the job. His time with Joshua had shown him that programming could be very important in the big picture.

"He almost canned you for no-show, no-call. I told him that you had gotten very ill on a date with me Thursday night and probably couldn't even get out of bed."

Harold winced. "Ouch. I bet that got a snicker."

She blushed, prettily. "Not from Charlie. He's very professional. I said it in the middle of the room, and others overheard it. They snorted and giggled. I said it without thinking. But he expects to hear you were too sick to call. I just want to know if it's true."

Harold shrugged. "Truthfully, I'll tell him I didn't feel well after supper, and after you left, I went to bed and didn't get out of it until Saturday morning. I never heard the phone ring between those times. The rest is too weird to believe."

"I could believe it." She put her hand on his arm and squeezed. "Tell me."

He held up one hand. "Later. I'm still not sure what to make of all of it myself."

She put her hand on his. "I was worried when you didn't show up. I came here after work and knocked to no answer." She looked at him, questions in her eyes.

He blinked at her. "It's very hard to explain what happened. I'll try, but I can't yet." He smiled softly, hoping she would understand. "Thanks for covering for me." He put more pictures and a few personal mementos into a box.

"Are you going to keep everything at your desk already?"

He shook his head. "I'll keep the picture of the Irregulars, but I'm shredding that character sheet first thing Monday morning."

"I already canceled my game tonight," she said. "I was freaking out just thinking about it. It'll be months before I can play again. And to run might be even longer." She hugged herself.

"No more Lorekeeper Barbie?" He raised an eyebrow.

She shuddered. "Please, I don't want to hear that name right now."

"Then I guess no one will be calling me 'Ken,'" he said.

She looked up at him and blinked. Then she smiled broadly. "As long as you don't put 'Lorekeeper' on the front of it, you can call me Barbie anytime you want to, Ken." She stepped close to him and looked up into his eyes.

"One more thing that I'm going to need to make the cube feel right." He smiled and took an empty picture frame out of the box. "Could I get a picture of you?"

"I think I can arrange that." She smiled broadly and glanced at the kitchen counter where he had moved the paper and magazine out of the way. "Blake's *Feaster From the Stars*?" She picked up the magazine and the card fell out. "Harold Matthers, you better not have printed this as a sick joke."

He shook his head. "No joke. I believe it's time to tell you about yesterday. You'd better sit down." He pulled a chair out for her.

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